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The Dish on a New Orleans Renaissance

By Kevin Allman
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Eating lunch at Cafe Minh, a sunny year-old restaurant in New Orleans's Mid-City neighborhood, it's easy to imagine that Hurricane Katrina was nothing more than a summer rainstorm. Neighborhood folks are chair-to-jowl with BlackBerry-punching business types. Platters keep coming out, laden with chef Minh Bui's signature Vietnamese-Louisiana cuisine: nut-crusted oysters drizzled in chili sauce, sticky pork chops over beds of lemongrass-scented rice.

It's hard to reconcile this scene with the floodwaters that inundated Mid-City until I go around the block to retrieve my car, which is parked on a side street littered with piles of debris. The ubiquitous National Guard spray-paintings still stain most porches. FEMA trailers sit in front yards of sad houses with peeling clapboards and lawns that look etched in acid.

Such is the reality of New Orleans a year and a half after what locals call The Thing. Despite a serious slump in business, most of the city's restaurants are back -- even if the tourists aren't.

Ironically, though, it's an ideal time for a food lover to visit. Dining rooms are open, hotel rooms are cheap (by national standards) and tables are easy to get, even at the big daddy of call-ahead restaurants, Emeril's.

"The only hard-to-get seat in this town," says chef-restaurateur Emeril Lagasse, "is one to a Saints game." And he laughs.

In With the New

Certainly a few iconic places were lost to Katrina, including Bella Luna, a romantic hideaway overlooking the Mississippi River, and Chateaubriand, the city's best French steakhouse. Newcomers, though, are sprouting.

"In the last year, dining has just taken off," says Lorin Gaudin, who hosts "All Over Food," one of several local radio shows about the culinary scene. "What surprises me are the sheer number of brand-new restaurants that have opened since Katrina."

Indeed, a clutch of newbies shows the city's still got game. Cochon, in the city's Warehouse District, offers Donald Link's spin on Southern comfort food, heavy on the pig (ham hocks, pork ribs with pickled watermelon, and that Cajun delicacy, boudin). Todd English, the celebrity chef behind New York's Olives, has opened Riche, a sleek, glittery classical French restaurant in the new Harrah's hotel. And chef Kevin Vizard, a local best-kept secret, has opened a tiny Garden District jewel box of a restaurant, Vizard's on the Avenue, where he cooks up such marvels as a savory scallop flan and redfish tamales. And, I'm told, on occasion: truffled tater tots.

Perhaps the most unusual newcomer is *Mélange*, on the third floor of the remodeled Ritz-Carlton hotel. The menu comprises greatest hits from other New Orleans restaurants, using recipes supplied by the chefs themselves. Weird? Yep. But misgivings are gone with the fork when you're in *Mélange*, eating Upperline's fried green tomatoes with remoulade, following it with alligator sausage from Jacques-Imo's and finishing up with pompano Napoleon (puff pastry brimming with Gulf fish, scallops and shrimp) from Broussard's. Tasting all those standards in one room is like a culinary Epcot.

Mélange's sort of experimentation, Gaudin says, is going to be vital as the city struggles to revive its tourist trade -- even for the *grandes dames* eateries, which have traditionally resisted change, relying instead on visitors and loyal locals. Katrina "did light a fire under the old-line restaurants," she says. "They must jump into the millennium to survive."

Rising From the Ashes

A few of the old-timers recovered quickly. Elegant, time-warped *Galatoire's* still refuses to take reservations for its downstairs dining room, as it has for 100 years. And it's still worth waiting on line for damn-the-cholesterol delicacies such as crabmeat *Sardou* (crabmeat, artichokes and hollandaise sauce) -- especially for Friday lunch, when the sly servers bust out their best dirty jokes and the restaurant turns into a raucous playpen for the city's well-oiled gentry.

Brennan's reopened in June, having lost its entire 35,000-bottle wine cellar in the electrical failure after Katrina. But its insouciance is intact -- as is chef Lazone Randolph, in his 42nd year at the stove. Sitting in the French Quarter courtyard, watching an order of bananas Foster being flamed at a table by one of *Brennan's* silky waiters, is still a quintessential New Orleans pleasure.

Over in the Garden District, it took a year for *Commander's Palace* to reopen, during which proprietors Lally Brennan and Ti Martin completed a \$6 million renovation. It shows, from the immaculate hand-stitched cream wallpaper to a gleaming new kitchen. In the dining room, a strolling jazz band entertains guests as waiters bustle around with gold balloons and platters of turtle soup and shrimp Henican. "New Orleanians think they don't like change, although we sneak new things on the menu all the time," says Brennan, though she knows better than to mess with such standards as the Creole bread pudding soufflé, which manages to be both feather-light and indulgently rich.

But not all the standard-bearers are open yet. *Mr. B's Bistro*, the popular French Quarter power-lunch spot, is still a construction site. "It's easier to run a restaurant than to deal with this," says owner Cindy Brennan (Lally's sister), gesturing at the workmen and plumbers. But Brennan is aiming for a March reopening, and chef Michelle McRaney's menu -- including the swamp-dark gumbo ya-ya and the trademark barbecued shrimp -- is coming back intact.

And then there's *Lagasse* -- chef, TV personality and proprietor of three local restaurants: *Emeril's*, *NOLA* and *Delmonico*.

"We were lucky, my wife and I. Our houses in New Orleans, they were okay," he says in that famous rasp. "But my in-laws, they had two houses in Gulfport. They're still livin' out of two rooms."

Emeril's reopened in December 2005; it suffered, in Lagasse's words, "major pilferage." His French Quarter eatery, NOLA, followed soon after: "Nobody was around. We were serving lunches to the National Guard," he says. Finally, in October, Delmonico got the FEMA trailers out of its parking lot and opened its doors.

Lagasse has the same problems as everyone else, though: lack of staff and lack of visitors. It's not that the handsome dining room is empty, or that you can waltz in anytime for his veal chops with risotto and braised chicory; it's just that you no longer need to call months in advance for a reservation.

"You know what saved us at Emeril's? The Saints," Lagasse adds, referring to the town's National Football League team, which had its best year in the history of the franchise, obsessing the locals for four months. During the season, Lagasse opened the bar on Sundays, drawing football fans and, after the game, some of the players. "Who knew?" he says.

Like everyone else in New Orleans, Lagasse is adapting.

Changing Tastes

I can't leave town without driving across the Mississippi River to an old favorite, Hoa Hong 9 (Nine Roses). Located in an unlovely neighborhood, it serves some truly lovely Asian home cooking. The staff looks worn and overworked. "Tired," the waitress says. "We're all so tired." But the food is, if anything, better than I remembered: a pungent, sinus-clearing pho (soup) with fresh-picked okra bobbing in the bowl; a clay pot of tender pork and eggplant in a garlicky bean sauce; and, most spectacularly, a whole just-caught tilapia, brought to the table head and tail intact, bubbling in a scallion-ginger broth.

I'm stuffed, but on the way out I notice a new takeout tamale stand at the edge of the parking lot. I poke a \$5 bill through a slot and am rewarded with a bag of six homemade tamales in a plastic supermarket bag. New Orleans never had much in the way of Mexican food, but the influx of day laborers helping to rebuild the city has changed that, probably for good. The smells of warm corn, lime and pork steam up the car, and I'm hungry again.

Even in a town as steeped in its past as New Orleans, change and adaptation can be good. And delicious.

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